CLAIMS

I claim:

1. A method comprising:

receiving multiple print jobs for printing in a first order, the print jobs having associated bids; and

prioritizing the print jobs according to their associated bids so that the print jobs are printed in a second order different than the first order.

2. A method as recited in claim 1, wherein the prioritizing comprises granting higher priority to the print jobs with higher associated bids.

3. A method as recited in claim 1, wherein the bids specify a current bid and a maximum bid, and further comprising, in an event multiple print jobs have identical bids, increasing a bid of at least one print job without exceeding the maximum bid.

4. A method as recited in claim 1, further comprising, in an event that a set of multiple print jobs have identical bids, prioritizing the set of multiple print jobs according to a second criterion.

5. In a network printing system in which multiple user computers are networked to a common printer, a method comprising:

allocating print tokens to the user computers;

presenting a user interface at a user computer to facilitate entry of a bid for a print job, the bid specifying a number of print tokens;

sending the print job together with the bid to the printer;

prioritizing the print jobs at the printer according to their associated bids; and

processing the print jobs.

6. A method as recited in claim 5, wherein the allocating comprises:

generating the print tokens at a server; and

serving the print tokens to the user computers.

7. A method as recited in claim 5, wherein the print tokens have a predefined expiration.

8. A method as recited in claim 5, wherein the user interface further facilitates entry of a maximum number of print tokens that the user is willing to bid, and further comprising increasing the bid without exceeding the maximum number of print tokens in an event that another print job has a higher bid.

9. A method as recited in claim 5, further comprising utilizing one or more fewer print tokens than are specified in the bid for a particular print job in an event that the priority of the particular print job is not affected.

10. A method as recited in claim 5, wherein the prioritizing comprises granting higher priority to the print jobs with higher associated bids.

11. A method as recited in claim 5, further comprising, in an event that a set of multiple print jobs have identical bids, prioritizing the set of multiple print jobs according to a second criterion.

12. A method as recited in claim 5, further comprising reporting to the user computer an actual number of print tokens expended to process the print job.

13. A method as recited in claim 5, further comprising reducing, at the user computer, the number of print tokens available for bidding by the number of print tokens used in the bid.

14. In a network environment in which user computing devices submit job requests to another device for processing, a method comprising:

enabling users to submit bids with their job requests; and

prioritizing the job requests according to their associated bids.

15. A method as recited in claim 14, wherein the enabling comprises presenting a user interface that facilitates user entry of the bids.

16. A method as recited in claim 14, wherein the enabling comprises permitting a user to specify a maximum bid so that their original bid may be increased to an increased bid that does not exceed the maximum bid in order to gain priority over a job request with a bid that is higher than the original bid.

17. A method as recited in claim 14, wherein the prioritizing comprises granting higher priority to the job requests with higher associated bids.

18. A method as recited in claim 14, further comprising, in an event that a set of multiple job requests with identical bids exists, prioritizing the set of multiple job requests according to a second criterion.

19. A network printing system comprising:

a least one printer;

multiple user computing devices configured to submit print jobs to the printer over a network;

the multiple user computing devices being further configured to enable associated users to submit bids with their print jobs; and

the printer being configured to prioritize the print jobs according to their associated bids.

20. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein individual user computing devices comprise a user interface that facilitates user entry of a bid.

21. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein individual user computing devices comprise a user interface that facilitates user entry of an initial bid and a maximum bid that the user is willing to bid in an event that another print job has a bid that is higher than the initial bid.

22. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein, in an event that multiple print jobs have identical bids, the printer is further configured to prioritize the multiple print jobs according to a second criterion.

23. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein the bids are measured in tokens, and the printer is further configured to allocate tokens for the user computing devices to use in the bids.

24. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein the bids are measured in tokens, further comprising a token server configured to allocate tokens to the user computing devices for use in the bids.

25. A network printing system as recited in claim 19, wherein the bids are measured in tokens, and the printer is further configured to report the number of tokens used to process the print jobs back to the user computing devices.

26. A printer comprising

a queue to store print jobs; and

a bid-based prioritizer to prioritize the print jobs in the queue according to bids submitted in association with the print jobs.

27. A printer as recited in claim 26, wherein, in an event that multiple print jobs have identical bids, the bid-based prioritizer is further configured to prioritize the multiple print jobs according to a second criterion.

28. A printer as recited in claim 26, wherein the bids include an initial bid value and a maximum bid value, and the bid-based prioritizer is further configured to increase the bid of a print job from its initial bid value up to the maximum bid value in an attempt to gain priority over another print job with a bid that is initially higher than the initial bid value.

29. A printer as recited in claim 26, wherein the bids are measured in tokens and the bid-based prioritizer is further configured to utilize one or more fewer tokens than specified in a bid for a particular print job so long as priority of the particular print job is not affected.

30. An architecture comprising:

a printer module resident at a user computer that presents a user interface to allow a user to bid a number of print tokens for a print job; and

a prioritizing module resident at a printer that prioritizes print jobs currently queued at the printer based on the number of print tokens bid for the print jobs.

31. An architecture as recited in claim 30, wherein the print tokens are allocated to the user computer, and the printer module comprises a token wallet to store the print tokens.

32. An architecture as recited in claim 30, wherein, in an event that multiple print jobs have identical bids, the prioritizing module is configured to prioritize the multiple print jobs according to a second criterion.

33. An architecture as recited in claim 30, wherein the user interface permits the user to specify a maximum bid along with an original bid, and the prioritizing module increases the number of print tokens from its original bid up to the maximum bid in an event that another print job has a bid that is initially higher than the original bid.

34. An architecture as recited in claim 30, wherein the bids are measured in tokens and the bid-based prioritizer is further configured to utilize one or more fewer tokens than specified in the bid so long as priority of the print job is not affected.

35. An architecture as recited in claim 30, further comprising a token server resident at a server computer that allocates to tokens to the printer module at the user computer.

36. One or more computer-readable media comprising computer-executable instructions that, when executed, direct a printer to:

queue print jobs; and

prioritize the print jobs according to bids submitted in association with the print jobs.

37. One or more computer-readable media as recited in claim 36, further comprising computer-executable instructions that, when executed, direct a printer to prioritize print jobs with identical bids according to a second criterion.

38. One or more computer-readable media as recited in claim 36, wherein the bids specify an initial bid and a maximum bid, and further comprising computer-executable instructions that, when executed, direct a printer to increase the initial bid of a print job without exceeding the maximum bid to gain higher priority for the print job.

39. One or more computer-readable media as recited in claim 36, wherein the bids are measured in tokens, and further comprising computer-executable instructions that, when executed, direct a printer to utilize one or more fewer tokens than specified in a bid for a particular print job if said fewer tokens are sufficient to process the particular print job without affecting priority.

40. A printing menu graphical user interface comprising:

a bid entry field that enables a user to bid a number of tokens for a print job, wherein the print jobs are given priority at a printer based on the bids; and

a token balance field that presents a number of tokens available to be bid.

41. A printing menu graphical user interface as recited in claim 40, further comprising a limit entry field that facilitates user entry of a maximum number of tokens to which the bid may be increased for the print job.